



# **FAA Reauthorization Testimony**

*Rep. Ron Estes | Transportation and Infrastructure | Tuesday, April 18, 2023*

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for the opportunity to come before the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee today to share my priorities as the Committee works toward reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration this year. Kansas' 4th Congressional District is home to the Air Capital of the World, so I've had a chance to hear many ideas from across the industry about ways to continue to improve the FAA.

## **Section 625 Aviation Workforce Grants**

Workforce issues facing the aviation industry are among our greatest challenges. There are workforce shortages across the sector— from pilots to aviation maintenance technicians to aviation manufacturing professionals. These jobs are highly skilled and in high demand across the nation. One way that the FAA has worked to address this is through their Section 625 Aviation Workforce Grant programs. These programs currently support grants to increase interest in and prepare students to pursue careers as pilots and aviation maintenance technical workers.

These programs are essential but vastly oversubscribed. Over \$120 million in grant funds was requested across all applicants for this program, with a maximum total of only \$10 million able to be disbursed. Only 23 applicants received grant awards. This demonstrates the pressing need to reauthorize this program at a level more commensurate with demand.

I urge reauthorization of the Section 625 aviation workforce programs, increasing the authorized funding, and expanding the program eligibility to encompass workforce development activities specifically for aviation manufacturing.

## **Airline Service for Smaller Communities Using Part 23 Aircraft**

I also recommend updating the existing FAA regulations to allow newer Part 23 aircraft to operate Part 121 scheduled service. The current FAA regulations do not allow for small aircraft certified after 1996 under Part 23 that carry up to 19 passengers to participate in Part 121 scheduled operations. While the same older, less safe, pre-1996 aircraft were grandfathered in, current regulations prevent upgraded and safer aircraft versions from operating Part 121 scheduled service.

There is a range of possible benefits associated with modifying this regulation to allow these upgraded small aircraft with the latest technology modernizations to operate in accordance with all other applicable FAA regulations governing scheduled airline service (14 CFR Part 121). This includes enhanced aviation safety, improved access to and options for air service to smaller and rural communities to close service gaps, development of new, innovative small aircraft, and elimination of the competitive disadvantage for U.S. carriers by aligning with international standards.

## **Aircraft Certification Service**

The FAA's Aircraft Certification Service (AIR) is the foundation for oversight over the design, production, airworthiness certification, and continued airworthiness programs for all U.S. civil aviation products and foreign import products.

As the FAA reauthorization process continues, a specific focus on the effectiveness and efficiency of regional Aircraft Certification Offices (ACOs) and the International Validation Branch (AIR-730) is necessary to facilitate safety, innovation, and U.S. global leadership in aviation. Both offices support critical safety reviews of products and technologies, which is essential to the U.S. maintaining the gold standard of aviation safety and innovation.

### **Regulatory Process Improvements**

Recent trends at the FAA indicate that administrative delays in the promulgation of consultative rulemaking, policies, and guidance are major limiting factors in advancing safety-enhancing products through the certification process. Moreover, the FAA maintains a vast backlog of technical standards, policy memos, orders, and advisory circulars. Administrative delays are inhibiting valuable innovation and safety improvements across the sector.

To improve the FAA processes for developing safety standards across various safety functions, I recommend including in FAA Reauthorization a requirement for the FAA to conduct a comprehensive review of their regulatory processes and report findings to appropriate committees of jurisdiction. This should include specific recommendations to improve timeliness, transparency, and performance accountability in promulgating rules, regulatory policies, guidance, and other materials.

### **Future State of FAA Product Certification Study**

New entrants to the aviation industry are ushering in a new era of innovation and safety. Supporting American aviation innovation is critical to maintaining our global leadership position in this arena. In order to preserve our gold standard, we must consider how advanced computing will play a role for future FAA engineers. Other factors, such as digital and modeling requirements, new procedures, and a greater need for accurate and timely presentation of data, should be considered as the FAA moves into a new era of product certification.

I recommend that FAA Reauthorization feature a requirement for the FAA to conduct an independent study on a future state on type certification processes. The FAA should utilize an appropriate federally funded R&D center, or other independent nonprofit organization with aviation policy expertise, to identify digital and modeling requirements, and necessary policies, procedures, and vision, to improve the safety and innovation of aircraft certification activities in the future.

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Mr. Chairman, thank you again for allowing me to share my thoughts on FAA reauthorization. It is invaluable to have an opportunity to communicate these priorities from our constituents. I appreciate your consideration of these items as the Committee continues to work under your steadfast leadership to pass an FAA Reauthorization in the upcoming months.